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ABSTRACT

This article examines the meaning of collaboration and the impact of ethnocultural diversity through a discussion of assumptions about how people work together, how knowledge is obtained, and how culture impacts assumptions and knowledge attainment. Following an introduction, section 2 on the meaning of collaboration examines various notions of the concept and develops a definition: collaboration is the interaction that takes place between and among people who are in a changing relationship with each other and are able to mutually communicate through a shared verbal and nonverbal language; therefore, they are potentially able to influence each other. Section 3 dealing with issues of collaboration points out that the Eurocentric world view encourages individualism and competition, while minority cultures, and more recently Caucasian women, have emphasized collaboration over individual efforts. This section also suggests that global diminishing resources have raised the value of collaborative attitudes among Europeans. Section 4 makes recommendations for educators: enhanced multicultural education, elevation of sensitivity and responsiveness, efforts to build community, willingness to work together, and understanding of world views. (Contains 23 references.) (JB)

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"What 'Collaboration' Means:

Ethnocultural Diversity's Impact"

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"What 'Collaboration' Means: Ethnocultural Diversity's Impact"

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine (a) what it means to collaborate and (b) the impact of ethnocultural diversity on the process. To accomplish this mission, key assumptions about how people work together, how knowledge is obtained, and how culture impacts assumptions and knowledge attainment are highlighted.

"What 'Collaboration': Ethnocultural Diversity's Impact"

I. Introduction

The word collaboration is being used frequently in education at present (Schwartz 1990). Higher education is no exception and collaboration is the hub of discussion and activity within diverse campus areas. Professors, teachers and counselors (educators or helping professionals) are being encouraged to collaborate and are finding this process valuable. At the same time, they are finding that the collaborative process is not without struggle and confusion. One factor contributing to this reality may be ethnocultural diversity (i.e., difference in racial and ethnic background). Educators represent a diverse population. Within our college, for example, the professorial ethnocultural profile includes African-American, European-American, and Hispanic/Latino. Culture impacts worldview, that is, the way people make sense of the world (Parham 1993; Sue and Sue 1990). Each person creates a unique meaning of her/his world; at the same time these meanings also have universal human qualities (Ivey and Ivey 1993). Clearly, the worldview which each educator brings to collaboration impacts the effectiveness of both process and outcome. And yet we know educators are and will increasingly become more diverse in racial and ethnic background as we move into the 21st century. Because so many diverse people in education are encouraged and are in fact striving to collaborate, it seems wise to examine closely what it means to do so and to consider the possible problems and issues that can arise.

The purpose of this article is to examine (a) what it means to collaborate and (b) the impact of ethnocultural diversity on the process. To accomplish this mission key assumptions about how people work together, how knowledge is obtained, and how culture impacts assumptions and knowledge attainment will be highlighted.

Consequently, some problems or issues related to collaborating may come to our attention. Finally, if collaboration is a worthy goal, which we believe it is, we would like to suggest ways educators, supervisors, and other helping professionals can help students and trainees develop and use the necessary skills to become better collaborators. It is hoped that this article will help all of us who are attempting collaboration to find our efforts more successfully accomplished.

II. What Does Collaboration Mean?

In "Reflections of an Experienced Collaborator," Thomas M McGowan writes about the need for analysis and evaluation of the process of collaboration (Schwartz 1990). In our search for what others have done concerning this topic, we found his observation to be correct. Even in articles or books claiming to offer analysis, what we found was some description of the history of the term, articles on how to do collaboration, or stories of different examples of collaboration (Schwartz 1990; Weade 1988; MacGregor 1990; Duff 1991). Little has been done to (a) justify definitions being used, (b) unpack assumptions inherent in the definitions, or (c) assess the cultural implications.

For example, the book *Collaboration: Building Common Agendas* is based on a whole conference that focused on collaboration as its theme. The definition the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education used in their call for papers and presentations for that conference was:

> "...those efforts that feature parity among the cooperating agencies in governance and resource allocation, use negotiation as a chief problem-solving process for the program, and have lots of liason roles at all levels of the university/school partnership. Collaboration

means having common agendas, sharing power and status, and building consensus; they require commitment and more give than take on the part of all parties." (H. S. Schwartz 1990, 1)

Some assumptions intrinsic to this definition are: collaboration is something that happens between different forms of institutions ("cooperating agencies" such as public schools and universities); collaboration is concerned with having to share limited resources (money, people, and time) and governance equally; collaboration is used to solve the problems of programs through negotiation; collaborators must have common goals and be equal in status and power. This definition is specifically aimed at institutions of formal education which hold a western European worldview in high esteem. It assumes that people are separate, autonomous individuals who come together in partnerships to solve problems, through negotiations that are rational, equal, and fair. It assumes that all people do and possibly should think in the same way (linear thinking: for every cause there is an effect). It assumes that all people value the same time orientation (present and future) and activity orientation (preference for activities that result in measurable accomplishment by external standards, Ibrahim 1973). A closer look at this definition suggests the need to more carefully identify the contributing factors required for there to be collaboration and to question the requisite assumptions, values, and behaviors necessary to promote successful collaboration.

Does collaboration involve only "programs?" Isn't it the case that parents could be said to collaborate, if they work together to raise a child? Parents are not "cooperating agencies," though they are working together for a common goal, the raising of a child. But other examples that may also be used are the kinds of collaborative efforts parents make with their children (not just for them). A parent and

child may work together, negotiating tasks so each contributes to cook a meal together, or clean house together.

Does collaboration connote equal power and status? Professors who collaborate and write an article, for example, complete the article and must identify which person becomes the senior author and which the junior author(s). While they have collaborated on a project, they do not hold equal power or status in the final project. In graduate schools across America graduate assistants often do much of the research work on a collaborative effort with the professor they work for. The professor has more power and status and will receive top billing on the authorship of the article reporting the research, while the graduate assistant may find her/his name included in the page of acknowledgments.

Do all collaborative efforts need to be one's of our choosing, or can one be forced to collaborate, because of lack of power and status? Some professors, as well as graduate assistants, work on articles, research projects, etc. with other professors because they want to keep their job. Teachers are faced with the same dilemma, as they "volunteer" to work on projects or "invite" interns and student teachers into their classrooms because of an administrative request. As the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1969,70) points out, collaboration can mean "to cooperate treasonably, as with an enemy occupying one's country." Is a sense of trust a requisite for collaboration? It is possible to conceive of examples of educators being forced to collaborate with someone they loathe or feel uncomfortable with because of fear of harm to themselves (e.g. in sexual harrassment situations in places of employment, or because they are deficient in research and publishing, both required to obtain tenure and/or to remain employed). Not only is equality not necessary for collaboration to take place, neither is a feeling of trust between the collaborators.

With these kinds of questions and concerns in mind, a fundamental question emerges: "Are there common traits shared by different forms of collaboration?"

Further, can we arrive at a definition of collaboration that crosses cultures and considers different worldviews? Two basic characteristics of collaboration are the interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships of human beings. No matter what the cause or motivating force, when people collaborate and work together, they develop a relationship. However, the manner in which we relate to others varies. Sue and Sue (1990) discuss the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck value orientation model of social relationships. This model highlights three ways in which human relationships are defined. Lineal-hierarchical human relationships are vertical in nature and emphasize an ordered position in which there are leaders and followers. For instance, elders and men are often viewed as authority figures in many Hispanic/Latino communities and families. Consequently, the male and/or the oldest person in the system is often perceived as the head of the group. Another example of a lineal relationship would be the educational institution in which the president or principal is considered the absolute leader and authoritarian.

Collateral-mutual human relationships are identified as a second type of relationship. The collateral relationship embraces specific goals and the welfare of lateral extended groups such that in times of struggle, friends and family members are consulted. For example, many African Americans value a supportive biological and/or extended family network (Parham 1993; Sue and Sue 1990). Family is perceived as precious in terms of proximity and emotional support. It follows that African Americans, embracing a family oriented worldview, might hold in high esteem their network of family and friends while operating in an education environment such as schools. Therefore, these African Americans may seek the advice and blessings of their network as they experience personal, intellectual, and professional growth and development. More importantly, the possibility increases that these African American educators will include the input of valued friends and family in their decision-making process.

A third relationship is the Individualistic relationship. Distinctive values included in this relational style are individual goals, individual autonomy, and control over personal destiny. An example of an individualistic relationship is an educational system that mandates the identification of individual goals for students, teachers, counselors, etc. as the primary mode of behavior to promote growth and change.

Aside from the two basic characteristics of the interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships of human beings, another fundamental ingredient of collaboration is communication (Burbules1993; Burbules and Rice 1991,1992). Communication can take on numerous forms (e.g., verbal, nonverbal, direct or indirect) but must exist in order for people to effectively collaborate. One has to be able to understand what the other means; collaborators must share some context with each other through a common language. Time to facilitate accurate communication is a basic characteristic of successful collaboration. In the relationship, each collaborator must work to send accurate messages to the other collaborator(s). Additionally, work needs to be done to ensure that the messages are accurately received. To facilitate the processes of sending and receiving accurate messages, collaborators must be aware of, understand, and have an appreciation for each other's worldview. People who are in relationships with each other and are able to communicate with each other are therefore in a position to be able to influence each other. This requires that the collaborators have spent time together, though not necessarily in each other's physical presence. One could imagine, for example, two people carrying on a mutual correspondence through the mail, where the two become acquainted, and influence each other, working together on some common goal, without ever meeting the other person.

Beyond the above characteristics of collaborations that take place with **people** who are **in relation** with each other and are **able to communicate** through a shared language, therefore potentially **able to influence** the other, are there

additional common traits? The number of people that can be involved does not seem to be limited to a set number, except that it is at least two. An entire university or school district of people could collaborate to defeat racism, sexism, and economic deprivation. Do the collaborators need to share a common goal or desire for outcome? Though nice to have, this is not necessary, either, as in the example of the graduate assistant helping the professor with a research project. While the professor may be hoping for a needed review of the literature, the graduate assistant may be looking to keep her/his job, or for a reference for future employment. Does there need to be a willingness to work together? Again, while it might be nice to have, it is not required. In a collaborative relationship that is oppressive, where there is no trust, respect, or a shared sense of status, as in a collaboration with someone who is being sexually harrassed, the two are working together, but the one is not doing so willingly.

If there is a shared project, goal, problem, something that the two, or more people involved are working on together, is the sharing of a specific nature? The American Heritage Dictionary (1969, 70) says collaboration means "to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort," but again this seems to be a western European bias toward thinking about collaboration in light of rationality and the mind. There are other ways of collaborating besides intellectual projects. When elementary students work together to plant a garden behind their classroom, they are collaborating. When teachers or counselors jointly purchase and share equipment together (like a computer), they are collaborating. These are examples of people working together for a common aim, people who are in relation with one another, aware of the other's perspective and able to potentially influence each other; yet, the focus is not primarily intellectual.

The best definition that we can offer for what collaboration means, a definition that tries to look at the act of collaboration from as many angles as we can collectively think of, is: *collaboration is the interaction that takes place between and among people*

who are in a changing relation with each other and are able to mutually communicate through a shared verbal and nonverbal language; therefore, they are potentially able to influence each other.

III. Issues with Collaboration

We began this article by saying that collaboration is being encouraged in education and that the term is currently being used often, in America. What this implies is that many in the American institution of education have not always valued collaboration. However, in our work to define collaboration we found that it is nothing new. It has been around as a way of relating with other people since people, as social beings, have walked on this planet. Yet, it is not necessarily the case that it has been encouraged or applauded as a kind of relating that should be taught to one's young, and developed in one's community. The Eurocentic worldview that has encouraged individualism and competition has done so at the expense of cooperating with others. Other cultures, many within the American system, such as Native American, African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian American, have historically emphasized and encouraged collaboration among their people, over individual efforts (Parham 1993; Sue and Sue 1990).

Women who embrace a nonEuropean worldview (such as African American and Hispanic/Latino women) have, within the context of their ethnocultural heritage, historically valued cooperation and sharing to maximize the possibility of being successful for the sake of the group (Sue and Sue 1990; hooks 1984). However, as many of these women assimilated into the American society some, who historically valued collaboration as a viable way of life, lost sight of its utility; but today they are reembracing the value of collaboration (Parham 1993). Caucasian women also have a history of being collaborators; they too learned to network and help each other,

sharing knowledge and skills, as they strived to minimize efforts and maximize the possibility of being successful and fruitful. But Causian women, within the context of their western European heritage, have historically felt that collaboration was a sign of weakness. In contemporary America, these women are beginning to percieve collaboration differently, and in need of further development and encouragement. Like their sisters from other ethnocultural populations, they too are embracing the value of collaboration (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule 1986; Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984, 1989).

As the world's resources grow scarcer and diminishing numbers of people are able to meet the demands of life as they have in the past, collaboration is taking on a new meaning. In the past western Europeans have been critical of these social perspectives, but now that their resources are growing scarcer, collaboration is held in higher esteem. We would like to suggest that this method of working together may be among those vital to uniting the world and promoting peace and harmony (if that is our goal). Certainly, we would like to suggest that collaboration is a necessary modality in education as we address realities such as economic distress, intense demands to publish or perish, increased research efforts, building of community, etc. (Martin, 1992; Noddings, 1992). Collaboration also is likely the method most conducive to the sharing /creating / constructing / furthering of knowledge (Thayer-Bacon, 1992, 1993).

Not all forms of collaboration are good, as we saw above. For collaborations to be positive, they need to be beneficial and helpful to all involved. Relationships need to be clearly defined and agreed upon. That is: Will collaboration be lineal-hierarchical (leaders and followers)?; Will collaboration be collateral-mutual (consultation with others when problems arise)?; and/or Will collaboration be individualistic (autonomy is important and participants have control of their destiny)? There needs to be respect and a willing spirit by involved participants. However, collaborators must understand the possible cultural influences on displaying respect.

Helpful questions include: (a) Does one show respect by demanding "direct eye contact" during dialogue? (a traditional white male European value), (b) Might respect also be exhibited by "indirect eye contact" during dialogue? (a traditional Hispanic/Latino and Asian value). Collaborators need to feel safe to speak and believe that they will be heard, that they have a role in this effort and their voice is valued. Thus, collaborators involved in a multicultural setting must understand the impact of history on various racial and ethnic groups, particularly within the United States. Because of a long history of racism in America, many African Americans, for example, feel invisible and unheard (Parham 1993; Ivey, Ivey and Simek-Morgan 1993; Sue and Sue 1990). Women of various ethnocultural populations, due to a history of sexism in America, also feel invisible and silenced (Belenky et al. 1986). Finally, effective collaboration needs a shared, common goal.

IV. Recommendations for Educators

Educators in various settings (higher education, secondary and primary education, as well as the helping professions) are faced with realities (economic problems, relationships problems, etc.) which provide an excellent opportunity to collaborate. Our wish is that the process of collaboration is a productive one for all concerned and that cultural worldview and values are acknowledged as an intricate component to all collaborative endeavors. To facilitate this process, the following recommendations are offered:

- Enhanced multicultural education for faculty, administrators, and students.
- On-going training to elevate sensitivity and responsiveness to cultural influences on learning styles, communication patterns, respect building.

• Genuine and heightened efforts to build community through development of trust and respect, and the building of relational skills/interpersonal skills/communication skills and sharing time together.

• Willingness to work together and a desire to participate.

• Understanding of your worldview and the worldview of those with whom you collaborate.

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